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ABSTRACT

Threaded discussion forums are asynchronous, World Wide Web-based discussions occurring under a number of different topics called threads. By allowing students to post, read, and respond to messages independently of time or place, threaded discussion forums give students an opportunity for deeper reflection and more thoughtful replies than chat and instant messaging sessions do. Research evidence strongly suggests that, by offering the following instructional benefits, threaded discussion forms are excellent tools for engaging online students: (1) they foster lively interaction between students and between students and faculty; (2) they serve as catalysts for active learning, group learning, and other types of learning requiring dialogue and the exchange of ideas and concepts; (3) they promote development of learning communities; (4) they motivate students to become highly engaged in their learning activities; and (5) they are well suited to covering topics that may be too sensitive, controversial, or personal for some students to discuss face to face. Instructors must also be aware that engaging students in threaded discussion forums may also add a great deal of reading to students' regular course load, distract students from equally or more important coursework, and create overwhelming work for instructors. (An annotated list of 13 online discussion resources and 15-item bibliography are included.) (MN)

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A Primer on the Effective Use of Threaded Discussion Forums

by

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Abstract

Research evidence strongly suggests that threaded discussion forums are excellent tools to engage online students in dialog. Differences between chat and threaded discussions are two-fold with chat being a synchronous activity where all students are participating at the same time and with threaded discussions being an asynchronous activity independent of time and place. It is these time differences that allow threaded discussions to encourage higher order thinking, reflection, and learning on the part of students.

Just as with classroom instruction, it is essential that instructors properly plan for the use of threaded discussions and be realistic in the expected learning outcomes for the discussion activity as related to the subject matter. To help instructors plan their on-line discussions the authors define threaded discussion forms, explain how forums work and differ from other discussion formats, and offer numerous tips on how to effectively use discussions forums for instructional purposes. Also included in the paper are two annotated listings of discussion forum resources available on the World-Wide-Web.

Knowing how to make effective use of threaded discussions is critical to those teaching in the e-learning arena. Active learning has at its core lively student-to-student and student-to-teacher interaction. Larson and Keiper (2002) hold that:

> Discussion is thought to be a useful teaching technique for developing higher order thinking skills; skills that enable students to interpret, analyze, and manipulate information. Students explain their ideas and thoughts, rather than merely recount, or recite, memorized facts and details. During discussion, learners are not passive recipients of information that is transmitted from a teacher. Rather, learners are active participants. Discussion, when combined with probing, open-ended questions, requires students to organize available information for the purpose of arriving at their own defensible answers.

In other words, discussions forums are the enabling tools for those teaching in the e-learning area to build greater student learning outcomes by engaging students in productive discourse. This paper will share concepts, suggestions, and action steps concerning threaded discussions and their use for instructional purposes.

What Are Threaded Discussion Forums?

A threaded discussion forum is an asynchronous (i.e., not live), web-based discussion that occurs under a number of different topics that are called "threads." A "thread" is one discussion topic whose name appears in the subject line in all postings associated with the thread topic. From a technical viewpoint, a threaded discussion forum utilizes electronic bulletin board software that assembles the different message postings and allows the end-user to view the messages either in chronological order, topical order, or both. It is this assembling and ordering of messages that allow the end-users to

experience the order or "thread" of the discussion or conversation. Because the discussion forums are asynchronous in nature, users can engage in the dialog at different times and locations knowing when and in what order the various messages or postings were sent to the discussion forum. How do the users know the order of the messages? As can be seen in figure 1, each message reply or "posting" is indented underneath the parent message, with further responses or "posts" likewise appearing underneath their parent messages. To read a message, users simply click on the message topic and a window opens displaying the message content. In the same message window, users click on the reply button to open a window to reply to the posting. To start a new discussion thread, users find a place to select a new thread or discussion and a window appears for entering the new discussion topic and initial posting.

Discussion Messages: 11/5: Change Agent
Return to Discussions
Compose Discussion Message
Search
Mark All As Read
Update Listing
Select topic: 11/5: Change Agent
Show all / Show unread
Threaded / Unthreaded
Select all
Select none
Apply to selected message(s) below
Compile
Go
Subject
Author
Date
Status
Attachment
443. 11/5: Change Agent John Sherlock Tue Nov 05, 2002 14:45
444. 11/5: Change Agent Robert Orr Tue Nov 05, 2002 19:22
446. 11/5: Change Agent Joe Harrill Wed Nov 06, 2002 09:00
461. 11/5: Change Agent Judith Revere Fri Nov 08, 2002 16:41
445. 11/5: Change Agent Dorothy Unger Wed Nov 06, 2002 00:02
447. 11/5: Change Agent Joe Harrill Wed Nov 06, 2002 09:03
448. 11/5: Change Agent Robert Orr Wed Nov 06, 2002 12:02
451. 11/5: Change Agent Joe Harrill Wed Nov 06, 2002 21:15
462. 11/5: Change Agent Judith Revere Fri Nov 08, 2002 16:54
449. 11/5: Change Agent Joe Harrill Wed Nov 06, 2002 14:21

Figure 1. Discussion Thread for HR-605 class at Western Carolina University. 11-11-2002. Used by permission.

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According to Virginia Technical Institute's Center for Human-Computer Interaction (2002), threaded discussions essentially consist of a message tree that includes basic information concerning each posting. Information about each posting includes:

- The author's name
- The time and date of the message
- List of users who have read the message
- List of references to responses
- The message text

According to David Woolley (1994), threaded discussions originated as a means of reporting and responding to problems during the development of the PLATO project at the University of Illinois. Woolley relates that Paul Tenczar, PLATO's Director of Software Development, asked the 17-year-old Woolley to write a program that enabled users to report software bugs online. The program was deployed on August 7, 1973. Woolley (1994) explains:

> A user would type a problem report into a special-purpose program, which would automatically tag it with the date and the user's ID and store it safely in a tamper-proof file. The same program would allow convenient viewing of the stored notes. Each would appear on a split screen, with the user's note on the top half and the system staff's response below.
>
> I came up with a design that allowed up to 63 responses per note, and displayed each response by itself on a separate screen. Responses were chained together in sequence after a note, so that each note could become the starting point of an ongoing conversation. This is what John Quarterman calls a star-structured conferencing system, and PLATO Notes was apparently the first of its kind.

How Do Threaded Discussion Forums Differ From Live Chat/Instant Messaging?

Threaded discussions differ from chat and Instant Messaging sessions in their approach to interaction and differ in the ways they support student learning in the online environment. For chats and Instant Messaging sessions, communication is linear, sequential, and transient while being completed in a real-time environment (Bull & Kimball, 2000). All of the users must be synchronously using the session to participate in the dialog: According to Berge and Collins (2001):

> When many people do so, the text on the screen can scroll along at a furious pace, with the discussion having much of the flexibility of the spoken word. Careful classroom management can mitigate some of the problem by establishing protocols for who can talk, when, and to whom. While a transcript of the proceedings can be accessed later for those who can't read fast enough or miss a scheduled discussion period, this medium favors those who can read and absorb information quickly, hold multiple discussion threads in their heads at the same time, and type with some accuracy.

Unlike a synchronous (i.e., live) chat activity, engaging in a threaded discussion is an asynchronous activity where participants do not have to be engaged simultaneously, and the conference is always available for the posting of messages. Because a computer conference is independent of time and place, "discussions are available 24 hours a day and seven days a week. Work is done at a time that is convenient to the user and fits into their personal schedule (Berge & Collins, 1993). Horton (2001) claims that real time discussions sessions are not as productive for student learning as threaded discussions. She suggests that the pace of the activity in chat sessions does not allow students an opportunity for deeper reflection and thoughtful replies:

> As its name implies, an exchange in a chat room can be less substantial than that in an online discussion area. In fact, for educational purposes a chat room provides few of the benefits of online communication. Because the conversation takes place in real time there is little time to craft a response. Chats are unstructured so it is difficult for students to follow the thread of discussion, and instructors will likely find trolling the chat archive for cogent contributions arduous and possibly fruitless. Setting up a course chat room is not a bad idea, but its pedagogical value is likely to be less than that of an asynchronous discussion area.

Unlike chat or Instant Messaging sessions, during threaded discussions learners can take time for reflection, to accumulate data, and to gather references with which to substantiate their positions. Furthermore, the asynchronous nature of threaded discussion forums is ideal for students who are hesitant to actively participate in a chat session or face-to-face dialog. According to Berge & Collins, 1993:

> This permissible time-lag in computer conferencing is particularly well suited to shy, thoughtful or hesitant conversationalists and to members of those cultures, (for instance, Native American), where answers and responses are to be considered and carefully framed before presentation.

How Does Threaded Discussion Forums Software Work?

Server-based software seamlessly enables threaded discussion forums to meet the asynchronous needs of users. The software utilizes Common Gateway Interfaces (CGI), which are by and large simple facilitator type programs. These CGI programs move data in the form of messages, between Web based forms for end-user interaction, and a message database where the messages are stored. According to Michael Shoffner (1997):

> Much online interaction relies on programs called CGIs (Common Gateway Interfaces), which negotiate a dialogue between the user and the Web server. The dialogue goes something like this: the user types information into a form on a Web page and submits the information to the Web server. The server accepts the information and processes it in some predefined fashion — adds it to a database, emails it to someone, appends it to a Web page. The server often sends a confirmation to the user, perhaps an acknowledgment of receipt or a page that displays the submission.

Figure 2 shows how data is entered into a Web-base form and is subsequently submitted by the user. The server receives the data, sends to the end-user a confirming e-mail that the data has been received, places the data into a database for archival storage, and finally adds the data to an associated Web page. Michael Shoffner (1997), Vice President of strategic development at Prominence Dot Com and co-author of the book *Java Network Programming,* says that discussion groups come in many flavors. He offers that the quintessential discussion groups system is Usenet, the Internet news network:

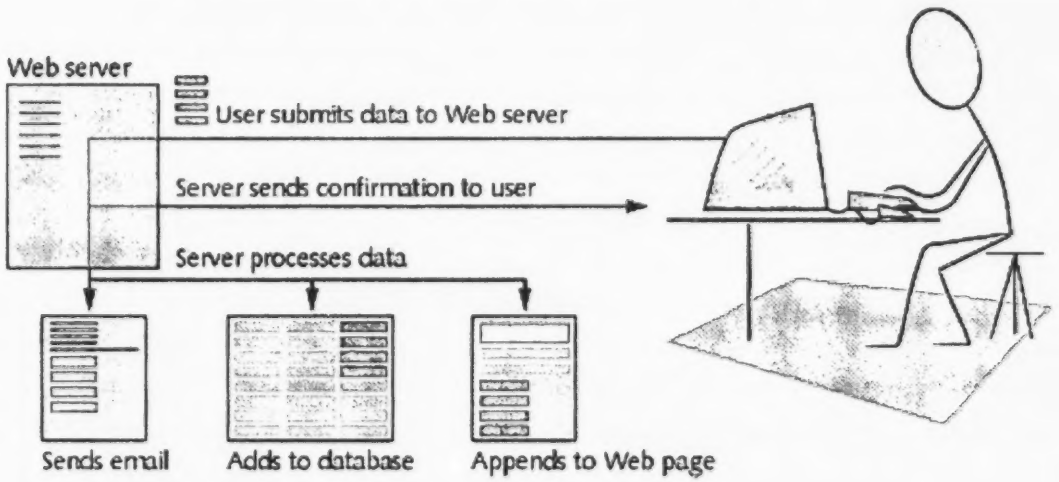

Figure 2- Process Flow for Thread Discussion (Horton, 2001, How Discussions Work section). Used by permission.

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> Usenet is a client/server system consisting of a network of servers that supports tens of thousands of separate newsgroups. Each group contains multiple concurrent discussion topics. Each topic, or *thread*, contains multiple articles, linked as a series of responses to the first post in the topic. A single simple thread may remain a straight line or turn into a tree as people post follow-up messages to replies and so on.
>
> Usenet users can read articles, post responses in threads, and start their own threads. They can even start their own groups, although that's a little more involved. New threads and articles propagate throughout the world's network of Usenet servers, and are available to anyone accessing the system.

Instructional Uses Of Threaded Discussion Forums

In the online environment, threaded discussions are the primary tools to foster lively student-to-student or student-to-faculty learning interactions. Threaded discussions are the catalysts for active learning, group learning, and other types of learning activities that require dialog and the exchange of ideas and concepts. Engaging students in a threaded discussion is an effective tool for overcoming the passive environment of past classroom teaching many learners have experienced: According to Dringus (2002), "There is an energy level in an online learning environment, an energy that is the collective effort expended by a group of faculty members and students, and results in a composite of useful resources that individuals or the class at large can extract on demand."

In the book, *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace*, authors Palloff and Pratt note (as cited in Edelstein & Edwards), "it is the relationships and interactions among people through which knowledge is primarily generated. The learning community takes on new proportions in this environment and, consequently, must be nurtured and developed so as to be an effective vehicle for education." To participate in a threaded

discussion forum requires the student to engage in critical and creative thinking. This level of thinking is necessary if the student desires to successfully participate in the class. Any lesser level of thinking could make the student appear inferior or lazy to other discussion participants.

Some research findings (Peters,(2000) suggests that students participating in successful threaded discussion activities are motivated to be actively engaged participants in a learning activity. This type of discussion dialog further promotes a rich opportunity for students to engage in peer-to-peer cooperative learning. Peters believes that "most educational environments are organized to favor independent knowledge acquisition and individual performance. A major challenge is for students to learn to abandon the individualistic notions of learning traditional schools cultivate." She also believes that in online cooperative learning experiences, students often benefit more from giving one another help than from receiving it.

Not only are threaded discussion forums effective in fostering cooperative learning, they are also well suited for courses that cover topics that may be too sensitive, controversial, or personal for some students to discuss face-to-face. Horton (2001) holds that "students contributing to online conversations may feel less exposed than in a classroom setting, particularly if you allow them to write using pseudonyms." Discussion forms are also effective teaching tools to engage reticent students who may find that online discussion is less threatening than speaking in front of peers. For these reticent students, the online discussion, as mentioned earlier, allows them adequate time to compose, edit, and refine their messages before sharing them with the class.

Any candid examination of the use of threaded discussion forums must also include the caveat that engaging students in this type of e-learning activity can "add hours of reading to the regular course load, or distract students from other equally or more important coursework" (Horton, 2001). An instructor must be aware that actively engaged students will submit a number of postings to the discussion forum, which can quickly become unwieldy. Even with a small number of students, reviewing the number of postings can quickly become overwhelming for the instructor.

Specific Examples of Threaded Discussion Forums

Current e-learning management systems include threaded discussion tools as part of the basic suite of services. For instructors, this eliminates the time spent searching and implementing an effective discussion vehicle. Furthermore, instructors interested in having students engage with the public in threaded discussions can explore free discussion services available on a wide range of topics. The following is a list of URLs providing access to tens of thousands of threaded discussion forums.

http://www.edwebproject.org/lists.html
Discussion lists and electronic journals for general education, K-12 education, educational technology and education reform

http://www.uwex.edu/disted/lists.html
Links to discussions from the Distance Education Online Symposium

http://www.oak-ridge.com/ierdrep1.html
Scholarly discussion for adult/distance educators

http://www.lsoft.com/lists/listref.html
Searchable catalog of 69,448 public discussion lists from LISTSERV® lists

http://tile.net/lists/?qry=descrip
Reference of discussion and information lists in alphabetical order from Tile.net

http://www.personal.u-net.com/~yandy/search/Usenet.html
Searchable index of Usenet.

Instructor's Role in Threaded Discussion Forums

An instructor or facilitator may choose to utilize threaded discussion forums to engage students in an active learning dialog. According to Edelstein and Edwards (2002.), "Just as the architect will design a blueprint to provide the homebuilder direction in completing a house; the facilitator must design and manage the threaded discussion to direct students in achieving the intended learning outcomes." The authors recommend that an instructor ask the following questions when considering the use of threaded discussions:

- How much value do I place on the threaded discussion for this module?
- Will the threaded discussion achieve the objective for the module alone? If not, what other activities should be developed?
- How much time is needed by the student to sufficiently complete the module?
- Will the student spend so much time finishing the assignments that opportunity to adequately reflect and apply the module material to their personal knowledge is non-existent?

Incorporating threaded discussion activities in a course requires the same careful planning and consideration as employing any instructional strategy. Care must be taken to create realistic learning objectives for the discussion activities along with consideration of the student involvement necessary to meet the objectives. Furthermore, an instructor will need to develop effective assessment methods to evaluate a student's performance and knowledge integration.

Online instructors must be keenly aware that discussions can require considerable

time and effort on the part of the instructor to analyze all the postings of students. Deciding how much instructor time is available to monitor submissions should be a key decision factor when developing the learning objectives and required student discussion activities. One possible approach is for the instructor to assign facilitator duties for the discussion forum to a teaching or research assistant. If this approach is chosen, care must be taken to ensure the assistant brings appropriate items to the instructor's attention (Horton, 2001).

If time is not available to monitor a discussion, the instructor may consider assuming a hands-off attitude for discussion activities. They can create the discussion area for students, followed by minimal monitoring. Instructors should be aware this approach negates many of the positive learning aspects of a threaded discussion, but the approach does provide discussion advantages for students. For example an instructor, "might find that students are more apt to contribute if they know you're not listening," (Horton, 2001).

In deciding on what discussion approach will provides the best learning opportunities for students to achieve the stated learning objectives, an instructor might ask students what discussion method they prefer. Horton (2001) explains:

> Online discussions can fail because the instructor is not involved or because he or she is involved. This factor depends on the dynamic that exists among the students in the class, between the students and the instructor, and the subject matter. Ask your students which they prefer, participation or no participation from the instructor. Decide whether you want an area where students discuss class topics freely or with the knowledge that they are participating for your approval. Trial and error may be the only method of discovering the appropriate level of participation.

Guidelines for Using Threaded Discussion Forums for E-Learning

One of the fundamental considerations when deciding to incorporate threaded discussion activities in a course is whether the activity is worth the effort. To answer this and other questions, an instructor must rely upon past experience and factor in-class responses as a good indication of online student discussion participation. For traditional classes that in the past have not actively engaged in face-to-face discussions, it is unlikely that students will be eager to engage in threaded discussions when taught online: According to Horton, (2001):

> If the subject doesn't normally provoke much discussion in the classroom, you may find that the online discussion is limited to questions about assignments or scheduling. Be realistic about your expectations. Don't go to the effort of setting up a forum thinking that your students will converse online if you are teaching a subject that elicits little in-class exchange.

As an instructor goes about making various instructional strategies decisions, it is critical that they have an understanding of what constitutes quality work from students. They need to know what they are looking for and involve themselves in helping to make it happen. According to Klemm (1998), irrespective of the specific learning activity, instructors should know what quality work is and should intervene as the work is being developed to steer students in the right direction. Once the instructor knows what constitutes quality student work, students who meet those expectations should then be rewarded accordingly.

One way to increase student satisfaction is to infuse a social presence into the

discussions. Encourage students to personalize postings to add an essential human element to the dialog. Personalization helps overcome the sense of isolation that is typical of the online learning environment. One suggestion is to have students use emotional type icons, such as ;<) to express a humorous remark, or :>(to express unhappiness, as well as other icons to add the human emotional element.

Furthermore, careful consideration must be given to the questions chosen for discussion. All questions must be guided by realistic learning objectives and must move the student to higher levels of understanding. Driscoll (2000) suggests that "questions should offer the opportunity to move the student forward to new information, backward to review information, and sideways to provide supplemental information." Not only should instructors give careful attention to the questions they pose, they must also consider the frequency at which they post new questions. Larson and Keiper (2002) explain:

> To keep the momentum of the discussion, and to facilitate students' responses to each other, we now limit the threaded discussions to three days. Since students interact over a short period of time, they know their comments will be read, and responses will be posted quickly. Students' interest in visiting the discussion forum is heightened when they know "new comments" will be posted frequently.

Strategies for Encouraging Student Participation in Discussion Groups

The first step in encouraging student participation in discussion groups is to empower the students with the necessary technical skills and abilities to access the discussion and to read and post messages. Instructors need to remember to provide necessary handouts and tutorials to help students become independent in their use of the

forum. The instructor's role is to teach the discipline, not the discussion software, so make students responsible and self-supporting in the use of the technology (Peters, 2000).

The second step to ensure that students participate in the discussion is to set the stage that the discussion is an important learning element for the course and will contribute to the students' grades. If they are to make the effort to learn the technology and be enthusiastic about its learning potential, discussion must be important to the course and contribute to the students' grades (Peters, 2000).

According to Klemm (1998), the most important thing an instructor can do to encourage students to engage in a discussion is to require participation:

> Tell the students that they must post x-number of items each week or for each topic. Critics will say that this approach does nothing to ensure quality of input. But it at least gets the students engaged, and hopefully, once they get caught up in the activity, they will strive to improve the relevance and quality of their work, because now they are on display. No longer can they hide. For many students, it is more embarrassing to make public postings that have no value.

After setting the stage with specific participation requirements and ensuring that students have the knowledge and skills to engage in threaded discussions, the instructor can foster greater participation and learning outcomes by providing discussion topics that build student interest. Discussion topics, when appropriate, should allow students to call upon life experiences and personal interests. To make the topics more appealing to students, it is ok to allow student input into determining some of the discussion topics, as long as those chosen meet the learning objectives of the course. It is recommended that instructors keep topics focused on specific learning objectives, as opposed to broad

instructional goals. Another suggestion is to "create multiple discussions for your course" (Peters, 2000). Creating multiple topics allows each topic to be better focused on individual learning objectives and provides clearer student expectations.

As students engage in discussions, provide appropriate feedback to keep students apprised of their location on the learning path. The instructor can also use feedback to stimulate individual students to share meaningful postings, which in turn, can help guide other students in utilizing higher-order thinking skills when forming replies. Klemm (1998) says to use feedback and structure to better engage students:

> For example, debates can be structured by requiring students to post a position, to which others respond with pro or con supporting arguments, followed by critique of the arguments. Or brainstorming can be structured by having students first generate a list of alternatives; re-think the list by creating new ordering, structure, or relationships, systematically evaluating each item to produce a "short list" of viable alternatives; and then reaching consensus decision on the best choices, followed by prioritization.

Another way to help keep students engaged in threaded discussions is to form the students into learning teams. Klemm (1998) believes that threaded discussions are a perfect match for learning teams:

> Asynchronous conferencing overcomes the schedule-coordination problems that plague typical face-to-face learning teams. The advantage for promoting online interaction is that learning teams should bond and thus make each student in the group want to do his or her share. Helping students learn how to acquire team spirit is important in itself, but it also provides students with powerful incentives to become more engaged in online conference activities.

According to Peters (2000), instructors should not assume that students know how to successfully collaborate. For example, students may need instruction on such behaviors as questioning, peer coaching, constructive confrontation, and conflict management.

On-line Discussion Resources

This paper serves only as a primer on discussion forums. For readers seeking additional information on the topic, there are a variety of on-line resources to explore. Listed below are a few recommended starting points.

http://www.w3.org/Mail/Lists.html.
W3C World Wide Web discussion lists

http://www.webdevelopersjournal.com/articles/discussion_mailing_list.html
Discussion Group & Mailing List software packages and their features

http://www.thinkofit.com/webconf/ Conferencing on the Web
Guide to discussion software by David Woolley

http://www.findanisp.com/usenet.html?src=gotousenet
Definitions of Usenet and listing of newsgroup hierarchies

http://www.quest-pipelines.com/
Oracle's Information Technology Portal

http://www.emoderators.com/moderators.shtml#sdg
Resources for Moderators and Facilitators of Online Discussion

http://home.okstate.edu/homepages.nsf/toc/EPSY5720cml23http://home.okstate.edu/homepages.nsf/toc/EPSY5720cml23
Developing online discussions in a Computer Mediated Learning environment

http://www.online.adelaide.edu.au/LearnIT.nsf/URLs/technology_and_communication
Reports on critical evaluations of on-line discussion forums

http://www.discusware.com/discus/index.php
Discus and Discus Pro are discussion board software packages

http://www.quicktopic.com/
Quick Topic free, one-topic, web forum

http://www.wwwthreads.org/products/ubb/
UBB discussion software

http://www.webcrossing.com/
Web Crossing discussion software

http://www.akiva.com/products/webboard/index.cfm
WebBoard conferencing software

Summary

Research evidence strongly suggests that threaded discussion forums are excellent tools to engage online students in dialog. The software that enables threaded discussions over the Internet is based upon relatively simple CGI programs that act as facilitators to move data between the various Web forms and server databases. Differences between chat and threaded discussions are two-fold with chat being a synchronous activity where all students are participating at the same time and with threaded discussions being an asynchronous activity independent of time and place. It is these time differences that allow threaded discussions to encourage higher order thinking, reflection, and learning on the part of students.

Just as with classroom instruction, it is essential that instructors properly plan for the use of threaded discussions and be realistic in the expected learning outcomes for the discussion activity as related to the subject matter. Instructors must recognize quality with appropriate student rewards and ensure that threaded discussion activities are guided by course learning objectives. Threaded discussions are successful only if students participate in the discussion. The first step an instructor must take is to require

participation in the topic discussion and to grade accordingly. Instructors can also choose to involve the students in the topic selection and should strive to have the discussion contain human elements that reflect student emotion.

Threaded discussion forums are valued assets for building community among online students. It is only through vigorous and thoughtful exchange that student learning outcomes are achieved. This in-depth and reflective dialog can be achieved by using appropriate technologies, including threaded discussion forums. Education will increasingly embrace these types of technology tools to meet its emerging goals of creating life-long learning opportunities for expanded adult audiences.

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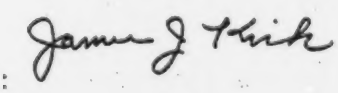

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